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Watergate, the media, and the universities

Katharine Meyer Graham

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The newsroom and the classroom may seem to be poles apart, but the business of the press and universities—the business of inquiry into facts and ideas—is basically the same. The Commission on the Freedom of the Press, which Robert M. Hutchins chaired, recognized this is 1947. Its report declared, "The agencies of mass communications are an educational instrument, perhaps the most powerful there is."

If that was true a quarter-century ago, it is equally true today. Watergate is a prime example of the educational function of the press. For months, virtually all that the American people learned about the illegal and improper activities labeled "Watergate" was unearthed by energetic members of the press. More recently, television has carried the Senate hearings into every corner of the land, giving the public an unprecedented course which combines elements of law, political science, psychology and sociology—and which will provide meat for students in all those disciplines for years to come.

To be sure, there are substantial differences in the ways the press and universities go about their common educational work. The press operates under the most intense and limiting pressures of time and space. Often we can only dig up raw information, raise a few questions or flag the inconsistencies. We look to the academic realm for the perspective, wisdom and scholarship which can shape enduring answers, suggest new ways of coping with new problems and expand the frontiers of public understanding.

I might note that the press increasingly has the problem of covering academic activities. For even as scholarly studies of the press are becoming more common and popular within the universities, so we of the press find ourselves obliged to devote more attention to work on campus too. It is not easy. In fact the world of ideas is a very hard assignment for the press. A scholar's research and writing may be so technical and abstruse that it surpasses understanding by all but the most brilliant of his or her colleagues. Yet the press must try to tell the world about this work in laymen's terms, as fully and accurately as we can, so that people can understand and appreciate these labors and follow the intellectual trails which have been blazed.

As institutions of education, the press and the universities have more in common than a generally shared function of transmitting information and knowledge. One of the most important questions about a university, for example, is how it preserves its integrity and maintains the ability to pursue the inquiries which in its judgment, or the judgment of individual faculty members, should be pursued.

This question is equally crucial for the press. Reporters, like professors, must be free to follow facts and ideas where they lead. And quite often where the facts lead, as in the Watergate case here or Vietnam abroad, may provoke the hostility of the powers that be.

The more aggressive and irreverent a newspaper or university is, the more doggedly it carries out its mission of inquiry, the greater may be the efforts to curtail its freedom.

There is a third similarity between the press and the university. Americans have always held that private institutions of learning, together with public institutions, are es-

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sential to a free system of education. With the exception of public broadcasting, the media are, of course, exclusively private. As private companies, news organizations have to be profit-minded and business-oriented. Our very quality depends on our ability to be profitable and thus support the very expensive news-gathering systems we must maintain. The stronger a firm in the news business is as a business, the more able it will be to meet its obligation to the public and to withstand assaults on its freedom by government on one hand, and by irritated readers or advertisers on the other.

Similarly, the excellence and freedom of a university depend on a sufficient measure of private support and endowment by people who believe in it, and indeed who love it. Any institution which is economically wobbly is that much more vulnerable to pressures or seduction by those in positions to grant favors, information or funds—at a certain price.

Finally, outside incursions and financial strains are not the only challenges facing both the press and universities. We also must contend with problems from within: the pressures of rising expectations; student and union demands; the proper and urgent grievances of women and minorities; the need to train and develop talented people and, once they have blossomed professionally, to keep them by competing in salaries and other benefits with our competitors, with government and with business.

It would be hard enough to keep all of the complex machinery of a great university or newspaper functioning smoothly under the best conditions. Today both institutions labor under the growing burdens of many types of regulation: wage and price controls, EEOC requirements, all of the intricate strings that are wrapped around government grants to higher education, and in the case of broadcasting, FCC policies and challenges when licenses come up for renewal.

Fairness and judgment

The more such threats and tensions accumulate, the greater is the need to keep our institutions strong and to enhance the quality of our performance. I do not take the second of these obligations lightly. While I do not believe that the absolute freedom—academic or press freedom—which we claim is conditional on "good behavior", I do believe that freedom makes demands on us, on our own sense of fairness and our desire to excel. If I may discuss these claims strictly in terms of the press for a moment, I think it will be apparent that the media and other instruments of education have much the same imperatives and duties.

I would start with the blunt concession that there *is* a legitimate problem of fairness and competency concerning the press. It permeates the news business, and underlies each one of the literally thousands of professional judgments which go into every daily edition or nightly news show. It is the problem of selection: what to report and emphasize in a limited space and time, in order to deliver news which is not only accurate in detail, but fairly representative of the whole turbulent stream of world, national and local events.

The reporter faces questions of fairness when he or she must describe the essence of a loud four-hour meeting in six inches. The editor faces fairness questions when he or she makes assignments and allocates the human resources of the organization among the many topics competing for attention.

More than a simple case

For instance, shortly after the break-in at the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, the *Post* assigned two reporters and an editor to that story full-time. The decision to invest so much talent on a single story was not made out of any partisan impulse or desire to embarrass the Nixon administration. It was a professional judgment that this matter—whose full dimensions we could not imagine at the time—involved more than a simple case of breaking and entering, and that the full affair ought to be brought to light.

I will leave to future students of journalism an evaluation of how well the *Post* and other news organizations have served the public in handling the Watergate story, both during those lonely months of persistent digging, and during the current phase, when information has poured out in a nearly overwhelming flood. At this point I would simply note that, at every step, the editors and reporters of the *Post* and *Newsweek* have taken extraordinary precautions and subjected their stories to the most painstaking journalistic tests to insure that every printed word about Watergate conforms to the highest standards of fairness and accuracy.

Such decisions are ultimately judgment calls. The ultimate question is whose judgment should prevail. What is most frustrating to critics of the press, and understandably so, is that we are, in the end, autonomous. Except in a certain few matters involving broadcasting, the press makes the initial news judgments and also decides how to handle criticisms of them. The editor who approved—or maybe even wrote—the offending editorial in the first place is the same one who decides how much space will be alloted to those writing letters or columns taking issue with it. And the editor responsible for a news story that comes under

attack decides whether to run a correction or otherwise acknowledge publicly that the story was misfocused or in error—if it was.

We serve then not only as defendant but also as judge and jury in our own case.

I do not know anyone who thinks this is anything but an imperfect system and one that leaves the way open for great acts of recklessness and irresponsibility on the part of the press. But I would also argue that, imperfect and perilous as it is, it is the best of the alternatives available. It is, in other words, a condition—a hard condition—of the freedom of the press.

Consider the alternatives. Surely, the least desirable would be that which substituted, however subtly or indirectly, any form of government control. Slightly better than that—less obnoxious, if you will—might be the various proposals for oversight, review or monitoring by some prestigious body, independent of both government and the press. One such idea is a press council, first proposed by Dr. Hutchins' commission in 1947 and recently established in modified form by the Twentieth Century Fund.

This is a tricky proposition, but it is not unique. Americans seem constantly to be seeking the ultimate impartial body that will render pure justice and find objective, absolute answers—where neither is possible. Thus, the press council proposal reflects, in part, the national impulse to buck hard questions, such as fairness, to special panels or commissions and to remove responsibility from those who should be made to accept it. It also reflects the yearning for decisive ways to deal with problems which are not, as I've suggested, really simple or easily resolvable.

There is a strong possibility that such a council would settle nothing and would be merely cosmetic. There are some people who consider that it could alleviate the problem by taking some of the heat off the press. But there is also the possibility that such a private agency, by acquiring an air of authority, could become a semi-official voice, a kind of surrogate for government. And if the history of such groups is any precedent, it seems all but certain that the political necessity of trading off the desires and views of different members against one another to reach consensus would also infect the result.

Easy solutions don't work

In short, in seems to me that all the easy responses to the hard questions facing the press involve more loss than gain and more surrender than salvation. To say that is to acknowledge, indeed to invite, a greater responsibility on the part of the press. For if we are to maintain our independence, then I believe we are also obliged to show an ever greater degree of professionalism, honesty and responsiveness to legitimate complaint.

I also believe that what the nation really needs is an even more vigorous, probing and independent press. For journalists and for the public, one of the least comforting lessons of the past few months should be the extent to which official cover-ups of crimes and abuses of power have worked, or at least have succeeded in keeping vital information secret until long after the event.

Millions of voters did not know when they cast their ballots last November what had been done in the name of the reelection of the president. The Congress did not know until this summer that the United States had been bombing Cambodia in 1969 and early 1970. Few people knew until this year that, for at least five days in 1970, a domestic intelligence plan which sanctioned burglary and several varieties of surveillance was official government policy. We may not find out for some time what other gross misuses of authority may have been perpetrated while the press and public have been so preoccupied and indeed fascinated with Watergate.

That there are analogies between the challenges facing the press and those confronting universities these days seems obvious. The task for both institutions is not just to protect the freedom of inquiry we claim as an absolute right, but to justify that freedom by a constant effort to use it better, to be more incisive, more dispassionate and more professional.

Freedom is not a tranquil state. A free society is badly served, and at times truly endangered, if its agencies of inquiry and its instruments of education are timid, defensive, or content simply to pass along that which is superficial, conventional or comforting. The real process of education, and the maintenance of a climate of freedom, require a constant curiosity, a clarity of thought, and a certain willingness to entertain heresies.

Addressing the University's board of trustees twelve years ago, my husband, Philip Graham, set forth an agenda which is still compelling today. "My hopes for the University," he said, "are low hopes. I do not dream for it dreams of universal achievement. I only pray for it some minor prayers for a small progress toward human excellence. I pray that it may from time to time abominate the proper devils, at times pay reverence to the right gods, at times oppose its considerable powers to the evils of ignorance."

These very un-low hopes should be pursued not only by those in the business of education, but by all who value the pursuit of knowledge as the spark and safeguard of an open, free society.

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COVER: In this photomicrograph, a slime mold, Dictyostelium discoideum, may resemble a shmoo, but its life story offers promise of a better understanding of how cells communicate with each other (see Page 15).

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